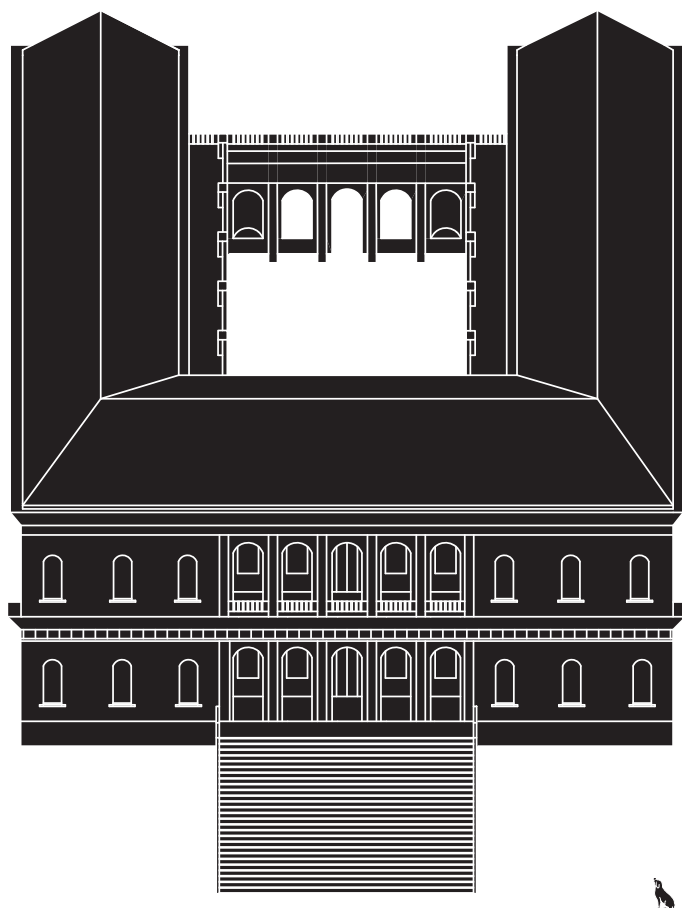


THIRTEEN NOTES ON THE VILLA GARZONI

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pictures by Bas Princen



I

The visitor who enters the Villa Garzoni walks up a monumental staircase, steps under a loggia, crosses a wall, passes through a portico and eventually arrives in a courtyard. The courtyard is separated from the fields behind the villa by a wall. On the main axis of

the villa there is not a single room. The rooms on the two sides are separated from each other (in order to go from one room to the other, Mr. Garzoni actually needed to *exit* the building).

II

Of an overall footprint of approximately 1,700 square metres, more than 1,000 are either loggias, stairs, courtyards or porticoes. Therefore, 60% of the Villa Garzoni is a void.

III

The excessive amount of void enclosed within the building makes the Villa Garzoni appear fake. It seems like four lonely façades standing in the middle of the fog, or emptiness protected by screens.

IV

The Villa Garzoni is set on a podium in order to raise it up from the damp of the marshy terrain. As a result, the courtyard is some two metres higher than the surrounding fields. A wall with two niches and three windows encloses the courtyard towards the back of the villa. Seen from the courtyard, the agricultural landscape looks unreal (just as the villa looks unreal when seen from the fields).

V

Jacopo Sansovino built the villa for Alvise Garzoni in Pontecasale (near Padua) around 1540. It is a villa dropped into a swamp, built in a time of lost wars and economic crisis. The once mercantile Venetian aristocracy, after the discovery of the Atlantic routes and the reorganization of international trade, settled in the countryside and invested its capital in landed estates. This shift was directly connected with a specific architectural object: the Palladian villa. Palladio confronted this depressive economic turn with a complete package of architectural optimism. The Palladian villa was intended as the source of a

new rational agricultural production, and it was a tool for the reorganization of an entire landscape.

VI

In his 1972 monograph on Sansovino, Manfredo Tafuri points out that “[u]ntil Palladio arrived at the correct formula that distilled the particularity of each client’s project into a general typology, the villas designed by Giulio Romano (the Villa della Torre in Fumane), Sanmicheli (the Villa Soranza, and maybe the Villa Nogarola in Avesa), Falconetto (the Villa dei Vescovi in Luvigliano) and Sansovino tended to focus not on responding to their patrons’ specific projects by seeking a more general solution, but rather on exalting the individuality of each design, which they perceived, in a chivalric sense, as being heroic in nature.”

In fact, there is a *chivalric* tone in the Villa Garzoni; Sansovino’s solution is *proudly* absurd.

VII

The Villa Garzoni does not try to organize agricultural production; it simply imposes an abstract geometry without any consequences for its surroundings. The building’s only relationship with the fields is a formal one: the excessive (and almost offensive) horizontality of the façade echoes the fog and the flat landscape. The Villa Garzoni remains an “urban type” lost in the countryside. There is no connection between the building and the fields that surround it. What is metropolitan stays metropolitan; what is agricultural remains agricultural. The monumental steps brutally collide with the plain like the bow of a stranded battleship.

In contrast with the optimism of Palladio’s villas, Sansovino’s Villa Garzoni is a failure from the beginning. Yet Sansovino, in his sarcastic way, seems to be more honest than Palladio: the Villa Garzoni looks as lost as the Venetian Republic was in the days of its construction.

VIII

Tafuri, of course, sees the isolation of the villa as a representation of the distance that “separates the subject from the object of exploitation”. And perhaps this time he is right. Still, Marxism in this context sounds ironically consolatory for the desperate Venetian elite that commissioned villas in the sixteenth century.

IX

“Sansovino’s villa in Pontecasale, on the other hand, was something apart. Away in the Adige delta, soaked by rain and fog and battered by sun, it represented a beautiful aberration in the evolution of architecture that was to have no progeny. Sansovino envisaged the country villa that he built for the Garzoni family in the later 1540s as a rural palace of noble dimensions. Like the other villas in the Venetian tradition, it has the familiar central loggia and side blocks, but it is somehow too aulic for the country, like a Doge at a swimming hole.”

James S. Ackerman, *Palladio*
(Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1966)

X

Ackermann is right as well. The villa of Alvise Garzoni is a failure, and in many ways. Yet the Villa Garzoni is not a simple failure, or even a plain mistake. It is an exercise in failure, an episode of a larger human *art of failure* (something like an *art of fugue*). The Villa Garzoni reminds us that architecture is always unable to solve problems. The sympathy between the villa and its inhabitants (and human beings in general) is a sympathy based on failure, on the common and laughable human tendency towards failure, isolation and despair.

XI

The proud, seemingly endless, oversimplified Doric frieze and the exaggerated staircase in front of the

villa declare the violent innocence of the client’s ambition and the perfect sense of humour of the building’s architect. The villa’s inherent emptiness and its crude, ostentatious classicism are the direct expression of these parallel intentions. There is a desire to settle, to establish an idea of virtue, to stage a lifestyle, to adhere to a standard that suddenly appears necessary. And all of this was unattainable from the start, impossible precisely because of the violence of this desire. The architect was somehow indifferent to this particular ambition and yet simultaneously prisoner of another kind of ambition, and of defeat. The villa remains there, hostile and confrontational, yet childish and somehow sweet. Alvise Garzoni embraced the lost cause of monumental architecture with the stubborn enthusiasm of a Trojan or a Confederate soldier. The architect seems to have been less convinced. Contrary to Palladio, Sansovino does not seem to share the ideals of his clients. The Villa Garzoni oscillates between extreme commitment and extreme detachment. Here, innocence and cynicism coincide in a product with no possible use.

XII

The Villa Garzoni comes from the same wild innocence that William Faulkner attributes to Colonel Thomas Sutpen’s home in his novel *Absalom, Absalom!* of 1936. In both cases the villa is just a mechanism for the attainment of status, and in both cases the villa fails to bestow this status. In both cases the house remains a ruin in the middle of a marshy plain, and in both cases the architect is a great one (Faulkner states very precisely that the French architect hired by Sutpen “was a good architect. . . . And not only an architect as General Compson said, but an artist since only an artist could have borne those two years in order to build a house which he doubtless not only expected but firmly intended never to see again. . . . [O]nly an artist could have borne Sutpen’s ruthlessness and hurry and still manage to curb the dream of grim and

castle-like magnificence at which Sutpen obviously aimed, since the place as Sutpen planned it would have been almost as large as Jefferson itself at the time; that the little grim harried foreigner had singlehanded given battle to and vanquished Sutpen's fierce and overweening vanity or desire for magnificence or for vindication or whatever it was . . . and so created of Sutpen's very defeat the victory which, in conquering, Sutpen himself would have failed to gain."

XIII

While hunting down the French architect who had tried to escape from the construction site of what was supposed to become Sutpen's monumental house, the Colonel recounts his childhood and his activities in the West Indies. The narration of the building of the house (of its construction and of the French architect's unsuccessful attempt to escape from it) and that of Colonel Sutpen's personal history coincide. The house is in fact the main tool of the *entire plan and design* which Colonel Sutpen developed as an instinctive reaction when he *discovered innocence* (or actually discovered that "there existed all the objects to be wanted which there were, or that the ones who owned the objects not only could look down on the ones that didn't, but could be supported in the down-looking not only by the others who owned objects but by the very ones that were looked down on that didn't own objects and knew they never would"). The house and the architecture of the house (demanding the knowledge and the work of the French architect) are in fact essential to *the entire plan and design* ("I had a design. To accomplish it I should require money, a house, a plantation, slaves, a family"). The house belongs to *the entire plan and design* of Colonel Sutpen as a tool of oppression (and architecture belongs to the plan as a science of oppression), an oppression that, according to his *innocence*, is the instinctive answer to the very oppression that the house is meant to overcome. In fact, "His trouble was innocence. All

of a sudden he discovered, not what he wanted to do but what he just had to do, had to do it whether he wanted to or not, because if he did not do it he knew that he could never live with himself for the rest of his life, never live with what all the men and women that had died to make him had left inside of him for him to pass on, with all the dead ones waiting and watching to see if he was going to do it right, fix things right so that he would be able to look in the face not only the old dead ones but all the living ones that would come after him when he would be one of the dead."

What follows are excerpts from the story of the French architect's escape from Colonel Sutpen's construction site on the plantation of Sutpen's Hundred, Yoknapatawpha, Mississippi, which is recounted in chapter seven of Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom!:

"He told Grandfather about it," he said. "That time when the architect escaped, tried to, tried to escape into the river bottom and go back to New Orleans or wherever it was and he . . . sent word in to Grandfather and some others and got his dogs and his wild niggers out and hunted the architect down and made him take earth in a cave under the river bank two days later. That was in the second summer, when they had finished all the brick and had the foundations laid and most of the big timbers cut and trimmed, and one day the architect couldn't stand it anymore or he was afraid he would starve or that the wild niggers (and maybe Colonel Sutpen too) would run out of grub and eat him or maybe he got homesick or maybe he just had to go -" ("Maybe he had a girl," Shreve said. "Or maybe he just wanted a girl. You said the demon and the niggers didn't have but two." . . .) " - and so he went.



He seemed to vanish in broad daylight, right out from the middle of twenty-one people. Or maybe it was just Sutpen's back that was turned, and that the niggers saw him go and didn't think it needed mentioning; that being wild men they probably didn't know what Sutpen himself was up to and him naked in the mud with them all day. So I reckon they never did know what the architect was there for, supposed to do or had done or could do or was, so maybe they thought Sutpen had sent him, told him to go away and drown himself, go away and die, or maybe just go away. So he did, jumped up in broad daylight, in his embroidered vest and Fauntleroy tie and a hat like a Baptist congressman and probably carrying the hat in his hand, and ran into the swamp and the niggers watched him out of sight and then went back to work and Sutpen didn't see it, didn't even miss him until night, sup-

per time probably, and the niggers told him and he declared a holiday tomorrow because he would have to get out and borrow some dogs. Not that he would have needed dogs, with his niggers to trail, but maybe he thought that the guests, the others, would not be used to trailing with niggers and would expect dogs. And Grandfather (he was young then too) brought some champagne and some of the others brought whiskey and they began to gather out there a little after sundown, at his house that didn't even have walls yet, that wasn't anything yet but some lines of bricks sunk into the ground but that was all right because they didn't go to bed anyhow, Grandfather said, they just sat around the fire with the champagne and the whiskey and a quarter of the last venison he had killed, and about midnight the man with the dogs came. Then it was daylight and the dogs had a little trou-

ble at first because some of the wild niggers had run out about a mile of the trail just for fun. But they got the trail straightened at last, the dogs and the niggers in the bottom and most of the men riding along the edge of it where the going was good. But Grandfather and Colonel Sutpen went with the dogs and the niggers because Sutpen was afraid the niggers might catch the architect before he could reach them. He and Grandfather had to walk a good deal, sending one of the niggers to lead the horses on around the bad places until they could ride again. Grandfather said it was fine weather and the trail lay pretty good but he said it would have been fine if the architect had just waited until October or November. And so he told Grandfather something about it. . . . He and Grandfather were sitting on a log now because the dogs have faulted. That is, they had treed – a tree

from which he (the architect) could not have escaped yet which he had undoubtedly mounted because they found the sapling pole with his suspenders still knotted about one end of it that he had used to climb the tree though at first they could not understand why the suspenders and it was three hours before they comprehended that the architect had used architecture, physics, to elude them as a man always falls back upon what he knows best in a crisis – the murder upon murder, the thief thieving, the liar lying. He (the architect) knew about the wild negroes even if he couldn't have known that Sutpen would get dogs; he had chosen that tree and hauled that pole up after him and calculated stress and distance and trajectory and had crossed a gap to the nearest tree that a flying squirrel could not have crossed and traveled from there on from tree to tree for almost half a



mile before he put foot on the ground again. It was three hours before one of the wild niggers (the dogs wouldn't leave the tree; they said he was in it) found where he had come down. . . . It was late afternoon before they caught him – the architect I mean – and then only because he had hurt his leg trying to architect himself across the river. But he made a mistake in the calculation this time so the dogs and the niggers bayed him and the niggers making the racket now (Grandfather said how maybe the niggers believed that by

fleeing the architect had voluntarily surrendered his status as interdict meat, had voluntarily offered the gambit by fleeing, which the niggers had accepted by chasing him and won by catching him, and that they now would be allowed to cook and eat him, both victors and vanquished accepting this in the same spirit of sport and sportsmanship and no rancor or hard feelings on either side) as they hauled him out (all the men who had started the race yesterday had come back except three, and the ones that returned had brought others,

so there were more of them now than when the race started, Grandfather said) – hauled him out of his cave under the river bank: a little man with one sleeve missing from his frock coat and his flowered vest ruined by water and mud where he had fallen onto the river and one pant leg ripped down so they could see where he had tied up his leg with a piece of his shirt tail and the rag bloody and the leg swollen, and his hat was completely gone. They never did find it so Grandfather gave him a new hat the day he left when the house was fin-

ished. It was in Grandfather's office and Grandfather said the architect took the new hat and looked at it and burst into tears. – a little harried wild-faced man with two-days' stubble of beard, who came out of the cave fighting like a wildcat, hurt leg and all, with the dogs barking and the niggers whooping and hollering with deadly and merry anticipation, like they were under the impression that since the race had lasted more than twenty-four hours the rules would be automatically abrogated and they would not have



to wait to cook him until Sutpen waded in with a short stick and beat niggers and dogs all away, leaving the architect standing there, not scared worth a damn either, just panting a little and Grandfather said a little sick in the face where the niggers had mishandled his leg in the heat of the capture, and making them a speech in French, a long one and so fast that Grandfather said probably another Frenchman could not have understood all of it. But it sounded fine; Grandfather said even he – all of them –

could tell that the architect was not apologizing; it was fine, Grandfather said, and he said how Sutpen turned toward him but he (Grandfather) was already approaching the architect, holding out the bottle of whiskey already uncorked. And Grandfather saw the eyes in the gaunt face, the eyes desperate and hopeless but indomitable too, invincible too, not beaten yet by a damn sight Grandfather said, and all that fifty-odd hours of dark and swamp and sleeplessness and fatigue and no grub and nowhere to go and no hope of get-

ting there: just a will to endure and a foreknowing of defeat but not beat yet by a damn sight: and he took the bottle in one of his little dirty coon-like hands and raised the other hand and even fumbled about his head for a second before he remembered that the hat was gone, then flung the hand up in a gesture that Grandfather said you simply could not describe, that seemed to gather all misfortune and defeat that the human race ever suffered into a little pinch in his fingers like dust and fling it backward over his

head, and raised the bottle and bowed first to Grandfather then to all the other men sitting their horses in a circle and looking at him, and then he took not only the first drink of neat whiskey he ever took in his life but the drink of it that he could no more have conceived himself taking than the Brahmin can believe that the situation can conceivably arise in which he will eat dog.